

Michael Collins and the Assassination of Sir Henry Wilson

On the morning of 22 June 1922, Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson left his home in London to unveil a war memorial at Liverpool Street railway station. When he returned at 2.30 that afternoon two young men, Reginald Dunne and Joseph O'Sullivan, were waiting for him. What happened next is best described in Reggie Dunne's own words:

Joe went in a straight line while I determined to intercept him (Wilson) from entering the door. Joe deliberately levelled his weapon at four yards range and fired twice. Wilson made for the door as best he could and actually reached the doorway when I encountered him at a range of seven or eight feet. I fired three shots rapidly, the last one from the hip, as I took a step forward. Wilson was now uttering short cries and in a doubled up position staggered towards the edge of the pavement. At this point Joe fired once again and the last I saw of him he (Wilson) had collapsed.¹

Dunne and O'Sullivan subsequently shot three pursuers (two policemen and a civilian) in their attempt to escape but, fatally slowed by Joe O'Sullivan's wooden leg, they were caught shortly thereafter. They were tried, convicted, and, on 10 August, hanged in Wandsworth Prison.

This ruthless killing of the Unionist M.P. and former Chief of the Imperial General Staff shocked and infuriated Britain and its government,

¹ Excerpted from Dunne's (apparently genuine) official report, smuggled out of prison and first published in the *Sunday Press*, 14 Aug. 1955.

and was one of the key precipitants of the Irish Civil War. However, while the consequences of the assassination were and are clear, its origins remain shrouded in mystery. This is not due to any lack of speculation; many attempts at explanation have been made, but they have only added to the confusion. Indeed, the history of investigations into the affair resembles nothing so much as a hunt for clues in a particularly baffling murder mystery, with plenty of suspects, dead ends, and red herrings. Despite this, a great deal of relevant material does exist, much of it only recently available to the public. Using this evidence we can now recover many of the missing pieces in the puzzle and, perhaps, even 'solve' the murder of Sir Henry Wilson.

Theories and Facts

At the time of the assassination two simple and plausible explanations were put forward. On the basis of documents captured with the killers, the British government hinted darkly at the existence of a conspiracy connecting the Irish Republican Army Executive, which was adamantly opposed to the Anglo-Irish Treaty, with the assassination. This argument was used primarily as a lever to force the Provisional Government into taking action against the anti-Treaty 'Irregulars'.² Once the Civil War had begun it was quietly dropped, and did not figure in the murder trial. The other public explanation came from Dunne and O'Sullivan themselves. Although not allowed to make a formal statement in court, they managed to smuggle one out for publication. In this Dunne declared that they 'joined voluntarily for the purpose of taking human life' because they believed Wilson to be a threat to both the cause of Irish independence and the beleaguered Catholics of Belfast. Wilson was an outspoken Unionist and an adviser to the Northern Ireland government, and was widely blamed for the Belfast 'pogroms' by Irish nationalists.³

Dunne concluded his statement with the assertion that 'you cannot deprive us of the belief that what we have done was necessary to preserve the lives, the homes and the happiness of our countrymen in Ireland'. No affiliation with any organization was claimed, nor did any group claim them. Both the Provisional Government and their opponents disclaimed

² Conclusions of a Conference of Ministers, 22, 23 June 1922 (PRO, CAB 23/30, c.36[22] and c.38[22]).

³ See *Freeman's Journal*, 6, 8, 12 June 1922.

any responsibility for the killing. Eoin O'Duffy, the chief of staff of the Provisional Government army, emphatically denied that the men were even members of the I.R.A.⁴ By their own account, Dunne and O'Sullivan acted alone and for patriotic and humanitarian reasons.⁵

Amid the confusion and violence that reigned over all parts of Ireland in 1922 neither version seemed unlikely. The British government's interpretation was widely accepted in Britain while the Irish public easily believed Dunne's portrayal of himself and his companion as martyred patriots, responsible for their own acts.⁶ 'These men fought for their faith', was a typical conclusion.⁷

In the years after the assassination a series of conspiracy theories began to circulate among I.R.A. veterans, in the Irish press, and in biographies and histories of the period. Most importantly, from the late 1920s on a number of ex-revolutionaries and acquaintances of Dunne and O'Sullivan have claimed that neither of the above explanations was true. They declared that the two men were simply loyal soldiers following orders, and that the man who gave the order to kill Wilson was Michael Collins, hero of the Irish revolution and first chairman of the Provisional Government. This verdict was endorsed by Frank O'Connor and Rex Taylor, biographers of Collins, and has been incorporated—with varying degrees of caution—into most scholarly accounts.⁸ The most important recent contribution has come from Michael Hopkinson, who upholds and elaborates upon the idea of a Collins conspiracy in his history of the Irish Civil War.⁹

⁴ *The Times*, 23 June 1922.

⁵ A copy of Dunne's statement is in the Art O'Brien Papers (NLI, MS 8442). Dunne's few words in court echo this defence of his actions on the grounds of personal principle. See Rex Taylor, *Assassination: The Death of Sir Henry Wilson and the Tragedy of Ireland* (London, 1961), 167–71.

⁶ See the *Irish Independent*, 11 Aug. 1922. For the widespread British belief in a conspiracy, see the *Morning Post*, 24 June 1922 (which accuses members of the Provisional Government) and C. E. Callwell, *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: His Life and Diaries* (London, 1927), ii. 349.

⁷ This was the statement of a Mr O'Leary, who was praying for Dunne and O'Sullivan outside Wandsworth Prison on the day of their execution. *The Times*, 11 Aug. 1922.

⁸ See F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London, 1973), 460–1; Charles Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland*, 383; Joseph Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985* (Cambridge, 1989), 62, and R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972*, 510. Joseph Curran is more circumspect in *The Birth of the Irish Free State* (University of Alabama, 1980), 224–5. Frank O'Connor's *The Big Fellow* (London, 1937) should be compared to the revised edition published in 1965. Richard Mulcahy made some interesting comments on these revisions (University College Dublin, Mulcahy Papers, P7/D/66). Taylor's somewhat muddled conclusions are presented in *Assassination*.

⁹ Michael Hopkinson, *Green Against Green* 112–14.

The figure of Michael Collins is a natural focus for such conspiracy theories. His leadership of the clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.), his activities as director of intelligence for the I.R.A., and his involvement in so many aspects of the Irish revolution have created an indelible aura of intrigue and power as well as the myth that his hand was behind every secret endeavour. This image of Collins as the man who knew and did everything, so irritating to his colleagues, is still cultivated today and lends automatic credence to any conspiracy theory which implicates him. Taylor and others make full use of this element of mystery to add weight to their arguments and to tantalize their audiences.

The key question has now become: did Michael Collins order the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson? Before assessing the evidence for and against, however, we should first examine the assassins themselves and their personal histories. By setting up Collins as the main actor in this drama, the conspiracy theorists have diverted attention away from Dunne and O'Sullivan. These, the actual participants, deserve our attention.

In the summer of 1922 Reggie Dunne and Joe O'Sullivan were both 24, unmarried, and still living with their parents. Both had been born and raised in London, both had volunteered for service in the British army (Dunne's father was an ex-serviceman), been wounded, and had been invalided out with good records. O'Sullivan lost a leg in France in 1918. Dunne was an unemployed teaching college drop-out, while O'Sullivan worked as a messenger for the Ministry of Labour. Both men were devout Roman Catholics.¹⁰

Neither Dunne nor O'Sullivan had been politically active before or during the war (Dunne, in fact, had joined the army after the Easter Rising), but they displayed the zeal of converts once they became committed to the cause of an Irish republic. They joined Sinn Féin and the Gaelic League, but there was no real focus for their energies until a branch of the Irish Volunteers (soon to be known as the I.R.A.) was formed in London in 1919.

Several companies of Volunteers had existed in London in 1914 and 1915, and much of their active membership, including Michael Collins, had fought in Dublin in 1916.¹¹ The organization in England collapsed

¹⁰ These details have been gathered primarily from: Taylor, *Assassination*, 106–10; statements taken in the case of *Rex v. Connolly and O'Brien* (the names first given to the police by Dunne and O'Sullivan) (HLRO, Lloyd George Papers, F/97/1/30); 'Shooting of Sir Henry Wilson' (report of a speech by Sean McGrath), *Irish Democrat*, Feb. 1948; and Dunne and O'Sullivan's farewell letters to their parents (NLI, Art O'Brien Papers, MS 8442; Mulcahy Papers, P7b/146).

¹¹ Ernie Nunan, 'The Irish Volunteers in London', *An tOglach* (Autumn 1966), 4; 'An Rathach', 'London Volunteers', *Irish Democrat* (Apr. 1948).

with the Rising. Its rebirth followed the usual Irish pattern. Small groups of young men calling themselves Volunteers began to join together on their own initiative, with the encouragement of a few older I.R.B. activists. These new militants were impatient with Sinn Féin-style politics and were eager to emulate the budding guerrilla campaign in Ireland.

Dunne and O'Sullivan emerged as leaders among these early expatriate enthusiasts when they wrote to Michael Collins (in his capacity as adjutant-general of the Volunteers) in mid-1919 to suggest the formation of a Republican 'division' as a fifth column in Britain. The leaders in Dublin and London decided that it would be better to control these 'young wild chaps' than have them act on their own, so the first official I.R.A. companies were established in London in October 1919.¹² Dunne and O'Sullivan were eventually sworn into the I.R.B. (which still dominated the movement in Britain) in late 1920.¹³

Dunne was soon elevated to the command of the London I.R.A., a position he was to occupy until his death. O'Sullivan remained an ordinary Volunteer, albeit a highly dedicated one. He was one of the few in London willing to carry out I.R.A. 'executions'.¹⁴

There was little for the I.R.A. to do, apart from street fighting, hiding fugitives, and running guns, until the autumn of 1920. At that time the Dublin G.H.Q. decided to organize a series of 'operations' in Britain in reprisal for the destruction of property by Crown forces in Ireland. In 1921 these attacks evolved into a wholesale campaign of arson and sabotage aimed at farms, factories, hotels, and rail and telegraph lines. A few 'spies' and relatives of Irish policemen were also shot, but the British I.R.A. generally shied away from murder.

The absence of political assassinations did not mean that there were no assassination plots. In fact, beginning in 1918, these became quite numerous. The potential victims included the Prince of Wales, Lloyd George and his cabinet ministers, Lord Fitzalan (the last viceroy of Ireland), Sir Basil Thomson (the head of the Special Branch at Scotland Yard), various Unionist M.P.s, and Sir Henry Wilson. These men were never targeted as part of any plan or strategy, but rather were chosen at different

¹² Sean McGrath to Michael Collins, 7 Oct. 1919 (MA, A/0457). The proposal to form a 'division' is in an undated letter to the adjutant-general in the same file. For the affiliation of the London companies, see Collins to McGrath, 1 Apr. 1920 (O'Brien Papers, MS 8430).

¹³ Sean McGrath to Collins, 1 Oct. 1920 (Mulcahy Papers, P7/A/8). For the role of the I.R.B., see the interview with McGrath in the Ernie O'Malley Papers (UCD, P17b/100). See also Art O'Brien's memoir of the organization in London (O'Brien Papers, MS 8427).

¹⁴ It was O'Sullivan, along with another man, who shot the spy Vincent Fovargue in April 1921. Denis Kelleher (O'Malley Papers, P17b/107).

times in response to some British action. Wilson, for example, was probably first singled out because, as Chief of the Imperial General Staff and a well-known ardent Unionist, he was held responsible for the executions carried out by the army in Ireland.¹⁵

Of all these potential targets—and there were others as well—only Wilson met his death, and he was not shot until 1922. Some of the planned attacks were bungled, such as the one on Lord Fitzalan. Some, like the plan to take Unionist M.P.s hostage in early 1921, were called off because the rationale disappeared, in this case because the British army stopped carrying hostages in their vehicles. Others simply faded away, like the elaborate scheme to kill Lloyd George after the deaths of Terence MacSwiney and Kevin Barry. Common sense finally prevailed over the thirst for revenge.

Several of these projects were shelved in the run-up to the Truce of July 1921 so as not to disrupt the negotiations.¹⁶ They were incorporated into a master plan to be carried out by the I.R.A. in Great Britain if hostilities resumed. Amongst other things, the plan called for the assassination of selected ‘individuals’, one of whom was Sir Henry Wilson. Preparations were made to carry out the scheme, but they were abandoned after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921.¹⁷ What was Michael Collins’s role in these affairs? Joe Dolan, a gun-wielding member of Collins’s intelligence directorate, summed up the universally accepted view of the ‘big fella’: ‘all orders for major executions were issued by the Director of Intelligence who was Michael Collins.’¹⁸ This appeal to the myth of Collins as the secret mastermind has been repeated again and again in the debate over Wilson’s death. In fact, whenever Collins contemplated such major ‘stunts’ as assassinations, prison rescues, and kidnappings, he faithfully consulted the G.H.Q. staff and other republican leaders. Such plans were even vetoed on occasion.¹⁹

¹⁵ Most of our knowledge of these plans comes from the O’Malley Papers. See Pa Murray (P17b/88), William Aherne (P17b/99), Denis Brennan, Frank Thornton, and Liam Tobin (P17b/100) and Denis Kelleher (P17b/107). Also important is a letter from Florence O’Donoghue in the *Sunday Press*, 25 Jan. 1959. See also Collins to Art O’Brien, 7 Sept. 1920 and Sean McGrath to Collins, 18 Dec. 1920 (O’Brien Papers, MS 8430); and O’Brien to Collins, 13, 20 Sept. 1920 (MS 8426).

¹⁶ William Aherne (O’Malley Papers, P17b/99).

¹⁷ ‘Report on a Visit to Britain September 1921’ [by Rory O’Connor] (Mulcahy Papers, P7/A/29).

¹⁸ Letter to the *Sunday Press*, 25 Oct. 1953.

¹⁹ See Collins to Sean McGrath, 26 Apr. 1920 (‘Unfortunately we have not been allowed to go ahead with this plan’) and 17 May 1920 (‘I have been trying to get this matter taken up but I have not been very successful. *The others* are very much opposed.’) (O’Brien Papers, MS 8430). For

Moreover, not all such plans were hatched by Collins and his men. Cathal Brugha, the minister of defence, was responsible for several of the most bloodthirsty ideas, while the decision to avenge MacSwiney and Barry was a corporate one.²⁰ Indeed, Collins opposed carrying out some of the wilder schemes, often to the frustration of the gunmen involved.²¹

Rory O'Connor, the G.H.Q. director of engineering, was put in charge of operations in Britain in late 1920.²² It was he who proposed and planned avant-garde operations like the truck-bombing of the House of Commons and the poisoning of horses in Buckingham Palace.²³ It was also O'Connor who put Wilson on the agenda for a renewed campaign of violence in 1921.

Collins retained a personal hold over the English I.R.A. because of his long cultivation of the mainland networks and his I.R.B. connections (he was chairman of the Supreme Council and knew most of the British leaders personally). He maintained separate lines of communications to many republican activists, and it is possible that he met Reggie Dunne more than once. However, it was O'Connor, not Collins, who dealt personally with Dunne and O'Sullivan in 1920 and 1921.

Another characteristic of the I.R.A. assassination plans of 1920 and 1921 was the number of people who knew about or participated in them. All involved lengthy and elaborate preparations, with an emphasis on escape routes. Virtually all the active I.R.A. and I.R.B. men in London were drawn in, and often delegations from Dublin and Cork as well, as the Londoners were felt to be timid when it came to actual gunplay. I.R.A.

examples of Collins's collaboration with Rory O'Connor and Cathal Brugha, see Collins to McGrath, 17 Apr. 1920 (MS 8430) and McGrath to Collins, 13 Sept. 1920 (MS 8426).

²⁰ Brugha's first assassination plan in 1918 is described by Sean McGrath (O'Malley Papers, P17b/100), Leo Henderson (P17b/105), and Fintan Murphy (P17b/107). His attempt to revive the plan in 1921 was blocked by Collins and Richard Mulcahy. See the accounts given by Mulcahy and Sean MacEoin (Mulcahy Papers, P7/D/3). For the attempt to revenge MacSwiney's death, see Florence O'Donoghue's letter to the *Sunday Press*, 25 Jan. 1959, and Pa Murray (O'Malley Papers, P17b/88).

²¹ Pa Murray (O'Malley Papers, P17b/88) and Denis Kelleher (P17b/107).

²² O'Connor's own account of his activities is 'Reorganising Britain' (Mulcahy Papers, P7/A/24). Collins's continued authority is clear from his correspondence with agents in London and Liverpool (Mulcahy Papers, P7/A/4-7).

²³ See the list of 'Operations Contemplated' appended to the 'Report on Visit to Britain'. For some startling details of various O'Connor projects, see Tom MacMahon (O'Malley Papers, P17b/86), William Aherne (P17b/99), Denis Brennan (P17b/100), and Denis Kelleher (P17b/107). Not surprisingly, some of O'Connor's comrades doubted his sanity.

men in other English cities were usually in the know, as were many republicans who happened to be in London on a mission or on the run.²⁴

When Wilson's assassination was first contemplated in 1921 it followed the normal rituals of consultation and preparation. As a result, many people knew about it and would report later that the idea had originated in Dublin. This is in stark contrast to 1922, when only two men were involved, no one else in London was informed, and no escape plans were made.

The Evidence

Let us now consider specific conspiracy theories. The original British charge that anti-Treaty rebels were responsible for Wilson's death was based on I.R.A. documents found in Dunne's possession. These turned out to be irrelevant to the assassination, and the Special Branch's murder investigation concluded that the killers acted on their own.²⁵ The home secretary informed Lloyd George that: 'We have no evidence at all to connect them, so far as the murder is concerned, with any instructions from any organised body. They were both undoubtedly members of the I.R.A., but that was not known until their arrest.'²⁶ For its part, the diehard I.R.A. executive denied the accusation immediately, and its denial has stuck.²⁷ This theory has rarely resurfaced. At one point (as discussed below) Denis Kelleher, a London I.R.A. officer, suggested that Collins and Rory O'Connor (the leader of the rebels) were jointly responsible, but his account is shaky at best and he contradicts himself elsewhere.

A more substantial report comes to us from Frank Martin, who claimed to be a pro-Treaty volunteer in the London I.R.A.:

In June 1922, I was approached by the Captain, Reggie Dunne. He asked me would I be willing to take part in the action he had been ordered to carry out,

²⁴ See e.g. Charles McGuinness, *Nomad* (London, 1934), 166 and the unpublished memoirs of Commandant Bat Keaney and John Sherlock, deposited in the Irish Military Archives and the F. S. Bourke Papers (NLI, MS 9873) respectively.

²⁵ For the documents, see Conclusions of a Conference (CAB 23/30, c.36[22]), esp. Appendix 3; L. Curtis to Lloyd George, 1 July 1922 (Lloyd George Papers, F/10/3/14), and Eoin Neeson, *The Life and Death of Michael Collins* (Cork, 1968), 94. For the conclusions of the Special Branch, see Assistant Commissioner, S.B., to Commissioner, Metropolitan Police, n.d. (PRO, MEPO 2/1974).

²⁶ Notes dictated by the Home Secretary, n.d.[Aug. 1922] (Lloyd George Papers, F/45/6/42).

²⁷ Ernie O'Malley, *The Singing Flame* (Dublin, 1978), 85.

namely the execution of Sir Henry Wilson. He said it had been decided upon by the [anti-Treaty] Four Courts people, the calculation being that this would force a direct British attack on them, and that 'Portobello' [the Free State Army headquarters] could not look on and see comrades attacked directly by the British, but would have to join with them, and so re-union would be achieved.²⁸

Martin is a problematic source, as there is no proof that he was ever actually in the I.R.A. and his statement became public only after he died.²⁹ There is no other evidence to corroborate his story or to support the idea that the assassination was an anti-Treaty plot. Other witnesses have said that Reggie Dunne was in touch with Rory O'Connor but O'Connor's own notebooks of the time make no mention of Dunne or of an assassination plan (although they do contain plans for other operations in England).³⁰ A conspiracy linking Rory O'Connor with the murder does have a certain *prima facie* plausibility. As their former superior he knew Dunne and O'Sullivan, he was familiar with earlier plans to shoot Wilson (and perhaps even gave the orders), and in June 1922 he was intent on restarting the war with Britain. O'Connor had the means, the motive, and the opportunity, but we have no solid evidence of his involvement, so the case must rest until some appears. It should be noted that Martin's account, although unsubstantiated, is as believable as any other of the witnesses who follow, and is more specific and coherent than most. It is also one of the few to contain an admission by Dunne himself.

A final possibility remains: that Dunne was lying to Martin about the plan's authority in order to obtain his help. Martin reportedly knew nothing beyond what Dunne told him. It seems to be true that Dunne hoped his actions would reunite the warring factions of the I.R.A. (see below), so that part of Martin's story seems to have an authentic ring, but why would Dunne choose to confide in an untried pro-Treaty volunteer (Martin said he joined in 1921)? On the other hand, if the story is true, it

²⁸ *Evening Press*, 18 July 1958.

²⁹ His story was also published in a peculiarly roundabout manner. Cathal O'Shannon, who reported it, was given Martin's statement in 1958 by a professor at University College Galway, who was himself given it in London in 1935. I cannot find any mention of Martin in I.R.A. memoirs or correspondence. Denis Kelleher cannot remember him either—see Taylor, *Assassination*, 80–1. Michael Hopkinson's notes mention evidence given by Martin, but he does not disclose the source (*Green Against Green*, 293, n. 6).

³⁰ NLI, Count Plunkett Papers, MS 11,410.

raises the intriguing possibility that Dunne told others about a fictional order—perhaps from Michael Collins.

The earliest attempts to implicate Collins came from anti-Treaty republicans in the 1920s and 1930s, who charged their perennial scapegoat, the I.R.B., with the murder. In fact, they were not the first to do so. The day after Wilson was shot, a Conservative M.P., Lieutenant-Colonel Martin Archer-Shee, claimed that ‘the leaders of the Irish Republican Brotherhood . . . are the people who send the murderers here’, but he did not name Collins and his accusation was lost amid the rumour-mongering tumult that gripped the House of Commons.³¹

Dorothy Macardle wrote in *The Irish Republic* that ‘popular belief attributed the assassination to the I.R.B. It was thought that Michael Collins ordered it.’³² M. J. MacManus said much the same in his biography of de Valera.³³ Sean MacConnell, a Dublin republican, was more forthright when he spoke at the unveiling of a monument to Dunne and O’Sullivan erected by their London comrades: ‘suffice it to restate what is common knowledge—that the killing was ordered by the Irish Republican Brotherhood.’³⁴

The most detailed of these charges came from Diarmuid O’Crowley, a former supreme court judge in the revolutionary legal system. In a remarkably detailed lecture, he accused an unnamed cabal within the Provisional Government of engineering Wilson’s death in order to break the Treaty and keep the I.R.A. united:

On June 9 a special messenger came from London to Dublin. He came from the members of the Provisional Government in London to the members in Dublin. The messenger’s name was Reginald Dunn [*sic*]. The messenger returned to London accompanied by the Chairman of the Provisional Government [Collins]. Two Scotland Yard men saw them alight at Euston Station and followed them. Dunn and another man, O’Sullivan, met the members of the Provisional Government in London. The order to shoot Wilson was given in London by two members of the Provisional Government, who were members of the I.R.B. Supreme Council [of which Collins was chairman].³⁵

³¹ *Hansard*, vol. 155, col. 1537 (see also *The Times*, 24 June 1922). Archer-Shee also claimed that Dunne and O’Sullivan only came to London the previous week. He was unable to provide any more concrete information to the Special Branch, who were deluged with conspiracy theories after the fact. See Asst. Comm., S.B., to Comm., Metropolitan Police, n.d. (MEPO 2/1974).

³² Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (London, 1937), 737.

³³ M. J. MacManus, *Eamon de Valera* (Dublin, 1947), 216.

³⁴ *An Phoblacht*, 17 Aug. 1929.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10 Feb. 1934.

O’Crowley’s reconstruction of events, while remarkably circumstantial (it fits with the movements of Collins and other Irish ministers as recorded in the *Irish Times*), is completely unsubstantiated. O’Crowley also charged the British government with complicity in the cover-up in return for the Provisional Government’s promise to crush the I.R.A., thus neatly tying together all the chief villains in the republican pantheon.³⁶ The idea of a British cover-up was revived by Michael Maguire in a 1982 article in the *Sunday Tribune*, but he failed to offer any new evidence.³⁷

After Fianna Fail came to power in Ireland in 1932, a group of London republicans, led by Pat O’Sullivan (Joe’s brother) and Sean McGrath, a veteran I.R.B. and I.R.A. organizer, began a campaign to have Dunne and O’Sullivan officially recognized as soldiers of the I.R.A., contrary to the Provisional Government’s damning denial. They also wanted the hanged men’s parents to receive pensions and to have their bodies returned to Ireland.

The campaign, fought privately and publicly—most notably in the pages of the *Irish Democrat* and the *Irish Press*—lasted into the 1950s and was highly successful. Its main argument, repeated many times with slight variations, was summed up as follows by Patrick Sullivan and Frank Lee: ‘The execution of Sir Henry Wilson was ordered by I.R.A. H.Q., Dublin, previous to the Truce. It was never cancelled—indeed, it was confirmed during the Treaty negotiations. The order was issued by Michael Collins, *chief of the staff*, and the direct order was conveyed to Commandant Dunne as battalion commander of the London I.R.A.’³⁸

Lee, Sullivan and their allies were primarily concerned with rehabilitating Dunne’s and O’Sullivan’s reputations and refuting Mulcahy’s dismissal of them as mere assassins. They thus concentrated on establishing Dunne’s and O’Sullivan’s I.R.A.—i.e. ‘soldierly’—credentials, and on

³⁶ We know from Home Office and Special Branch documents, however, that the British government knew nothing of Dunne or O’Sullivan before the murder, and concluded that they acted alone, thus contradicting this part of O’Crowley’s account. See nn. 25 and 26 above.

³⁷ Michael Maguire, ‘Did Collins Have Wilson Shot?’, *Sunday Tribune*, 27 June 1982.

³⁸ Patrick Sullivan and Frank Lee, ‘The Execution of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: The Facts’, *Sunday Press*, 10 Aug. 1958. A few errors in the quotation should be pointed out: Collins was never chief of staff, and there never was a London battalion of the I.R.A. For the campaign, see the 1938 open letter from the ‘Late Intelligence and Arms Officer, London Units I.R.A.’ [Sean McGrath] (O’Brien Papers, MS 8461) and ‘Shooting of Sir Henry Wilson’, *Irish Democrat*, Feb. 1948. These arguments are found in their most complete form in Sullivan and Lee, ‘The Execution’, and in *Remembrance*, a pamphlet published by the London Memorial Committee of ex-I.R.A. and Cumann na mBan. This can be found in the Florence O’Donoghue Papers (NLI, MS 31,285) and is reprinted in *Assassination*.

proving the existence of a previous legitimate order to eliminate Wilson. What they did not do is prove that Collins ordered the killing in the summer of 1922. To imply as they did that the absence of a direct cancellation meant that the order was still in force is ludicrous; the plan was only supposed to be put into effect in the event of renewed fighting. Dunne may well have convinced himself and O'Sullivan that the original order somehow made Wilson a legitimate target, but that is a separate issue.

The only public statements by a subordinate of Collins relating to the matter have come from Joe Dolan. In 1953 he stated that Collins, in his capacity as Director of Intelligence, gave the order to kill Wilson to Sam Maguire—described as 'O/C Britain'—who turned the matter over to Dunne. The operation was meant as a reprisal for Wilson's alleged encouragement of Protestant violence in Northern Ireland.³⁹ In 1960, in a letter to Rex Taylor, Dolan added that the order was given 'about a fortnight before Wilson was removed from the scene'.⁴⁰ Dolan, like O'Crowley, is gratifyingly precise in identifying the date and chain of command, although his letters do contain some factual errors. For example, Collins was no longer Director of Intelligence in June 1922, and Rory O'Connor, not Maguire, was 'O/C Britain'.

The only other detailed account of the origins of the order was given by Sean McGrath:

A meeting was held in December [1921] in Shaftesbury Avenue of the I.R.B. [and] Officers of Companies in London. Dunne was then O/C I.R.A. [Sam] Maguire i/c I.R.B. He had been appointed Intelligence and Arms Officer while I was away. At that meeting it was decided to sink our differences and to carry out the execution of three people. 1) Bowen Colthurst 2) a woman who had betrayed people in Cork but who had been traced 3) Sir Henry Wilson.⁴¹

McGrath's account was positively denied by Denis Kelleher, Dunne's second-in-command, who attended this and other I.R.B. meetings. It is implicitly denied by the accounts of other I.R.B. men on the spot, who make no mention of this apparently crucial decision.⁴² In addition to this, McGrath's testimony, given to Ernie O'Malley, seems odd in light of the

³⁹ *Sunday Press*, 27 Sept. 1953. ⁴⁰ Taylor, *Assassination*, 219.

⁴¹ Sean McGrath (O'Malley Papers, P17b/100). Bowen Colthurst was the officer responsible for the shooting of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington in the Dublin Rising of 1916.

⁴² Denis Kelleher (O'Malley Papers, P17b/107) and Denis Brennan (P17b/37, 100). See also Art O'Brien's memoir of the London I.R.B. (O'Brien Papers, MS 8427).

fact that, as part of the campaign to rehabilitate Dunne and O'Sullivan, he repeatedly stated for many years that the orders came from Dublin.⁴³ McGrath's son also seemingly contradicted his father after his death by endorsing Joe Dolan's version of events.⁴⁴

No other witness has claimed to have such precise knowledge of the affair, but there are others who refer to specific times and places, and so can be checked against alternate claims. One key pair of witnesses is Mick Murphy and Con Neenan, both veteran officers of the Cork City I.R.A. and frequent visitors to London. Murphy told Ernie O'Malley that he was in London with Neenan just before the assassination and that Dunne and Joe Carr, another London activist, asked for help in killing Wilson, for which they had instructions from Collins.⁴⁵ Joe Carr consistently denied any knowledge of the killing, a claim which, since he was a gun-runner rather than a gunman, rings true.⁴⁶ For his part, Con Neenan has stated that he was in Cork at the time, and other witnesses have placed both him and Murphy in their home city then.⁴⁷ Neenan has given three separate accounts of his connection with the affair, each of them different from Murphy's. He told O'Malley that he was in London in the first week of December 1921 trying to trace an informer from Cork, and during his stay encountered Sam Maguire: 'They were tracking Wilson and they were very bitter about him. Sam discussed with me the shooting of Henry Wilson. I think D[unne] and S[ullivan] made up their minds to do the job. Sam was here in Ireland at the time. They used to visit Murray a Dublin lad there, a volunteer, and they decided to get it over... I have a feeling that Sam Maguire knew that these two lads would do the Wilson job.'⁴⁸

Nearly thirty years later he told a very different story:

I knew both Reggie Dunne and Joe O'Sullivan well; I had met them with Sam Maguire. Sometime in May [1922?], I had bumped into him one night at Mooney's when I called in for cigarettes. He emerged with me; he was with Frank Thornton, one of Collins' men, *the job on Wilson is on*, said he. I was not to breathe a word. I could not. It was a profound secret. And I did not breathe it.

⁴³ *Irish Democrat*, Feb. 1948.

⁴⁴ Proinsias MacAonghusa, 'The Day a Field-Marshal Died', *Sunday Independent*, 2 July 1967.

⁴⁵ Mick Murphy (O'Malley Papers, P17b/112).

⁴⁶ Notes of a conversation with Sean MacGrath and Denis Carr, 18 Feb. 1935 (O'Brien Papers, MS 8427); Joe Carr to Art O'Brien, 31 May 1938 (MS 8461).

⁴⁷ Uinseann MacEoin (ed.), *Survivors* (Dublin, 1980), 243; Pat Sullivan [no relation to Joe] (O'Malley Papers, P17b/111).

⁴⁸ Con Neenan (O'Malley Papers, P17b/112).

Sean O'Hegarty had sent me and Mick Murphy over to London, to track down and shoot a famous spy we had here [in Cork].⁴⁹

Here Neenan apparently places himself and Murphy, and the hunt for the spy, five months later and suggests Collins's direct involvement. The first account, although confusing as to timing (when did they decide to get it over and when did Maguire know?), suggests they acted on their own. It might jibe with McGrath's story, but the contradictions between these two accounts are difficult to reconcile.

Neenan also wrote a third, anonymous, account in which his first knowledge of the Wilson plot, and his encounter with Frank Thornton and Sam Maguire, is backdated to the spring of 1921. He returned to England in December on another spy-hunt, thereby 'resuming the contact' with Dunne and O'Sullivan. No mention is made of the plan to kill Wilson at this date, nor is there any reference to a visit in May 1922.⁵⁰ Apart from the absence of a Wilson plot in December 1921, this would fit with both of the other accounts if Neenan, in the second quotation, meant May of 1921 rather than 1922. What does seem likely is that Neenan was quite unreliable as to when he heard about the Wilson plot.

Frank Thornton, a member of Collins's 'squad', has said only that 'the order to kill Wilson was carried out by these two soldiers of the I.R.A. on the direct orders of their H.Q.'⁵¹ This seems to be a rather formulaic endorsement of Sullivan, Lee, and McGrath's campaign to rehabilitate Dunne's and O'Sullivan's reputations: it stresses the fact that the pair were soldiers and that there was an official order, but it tells us nothing about who was involved or when the order was given.

Another Cork witness was Billie Aherne, who was also active in London and knew Dunne well:

D[unne] and S[ullivan] came to Dublin and I was with them for a holiday. They intended to stay, but Collins or whoever was in charge ordered them back... Then they decided to shoot Wilson. They had instructions to shoot Wilson before the Truce, but the order was never countermanded. So they got on to him... They saw S[am] M[aguire] at Mooney's Pub the night before. The Cumann [na mBan] were attacking D and S. Dunne said 'I'll show you that we'll do something yet.'⁵²

⁴⁹ MacEoin (ed.), *Survivors*, 243-4.

⁵⁰ O'Donoghue Papers, MS 31,337.

⁵¹ O'Malley Papers, P17b/100.

⁵² William Aherne (O'Malley Papers, P17b/99).

Aherne also gave a lengthy account to Maurice (Moss) Twomey:

Billie is sure that nobody, from any side, gave an order for the shooting at the time it took place, but that Dunne and others would or might take up the attitude—the order was never cancelled, therefore it stood . . . one theory B. has why Dunne acted is that he knows such people as Cumann na mBan at the time in London were saying Dunne was no good, that the I.R.A. was doing nothing, etc. and that he believes D. reacted to this kind of criticism. Billie says he knows that D. decided on the shooting without much thought or plan. That the night before he read in the newspapers that Wilson was to unveil a war memorial next day, and he saw Sullivan and told him that he was going to shoot Wilson after he left the unveiling place (he gave me some details of this which it is not necessary to go into). Billie says he is certain there were no officers in London from Dublin before the shooting, in connection with it.⁵³

Ulick O'Connor has also reported that Aherne told him he 'met RD in Dublin a week before the affair and he remembered clearly how angry Dunne was that Collins would not allow him proceed with the killing'.⁵⁴ And finally, Pat O'Sullivan once referred to a 1939 statement from Aherne confirming 'that the order was official', but this probably referred to the pre-Treaty order, as mentioned in the first Aherne quotation above.⁵⁵

P. A. (Pa) Murray, our last witness from the Cork I.R.A., said that he met Dunne and O'Sullivan in London in May (on his way back from shooting an informer in New York), and that they told him of their intention to shoot Wilson. In another statement he declared that 'the shooting of Henry Wilson was official. Collins knew of it and Sam Maguire also.'⁵⁶ Murray, who was put in charge of the I.R.A. in Britain during the Civil War, did not reveal how he knew this.

Denis Kelleher, the adjutant of the London I.R.A., has given us a particularly confusing set of statements. In 1953, in a letter to the *Sunday Press*, he confined himself to the Sullivan and Lee line: 'I state emphatically that the instructions for the liquidation of Sir Henry Wilson was contingent on the break down of the peace negotiations. The order was not subsequently cancelled.'⁵⁷ At roughly the same time however, he told Ernie O'Malley that:

⁵³ Moss Twomey to Florence O'Donoghue, 10 Sept. 1953 (O'Donoghue Papers, MS 31,421).

⁵⁴ From a review in the *Sunday Independent*, 2 Nov. 1980, as quoted in Meda Ryan, *The Day Michael Collins was Shot* (Swords, 1989), 20.

⁵⁵ *Sunday Press*, 10 Aug. 1958.

⁵⁶ Pa Murray (O'Malley Papers, P17b/88, 89).

⁵⁷ *Sunday Press*, 15 Oct 1953.

Collins and Rory O'Connor were concerned in the Wilson affair. Men were sent North to contact Wilson, but they failed. [Liam] Tobin and [Tom] Cullen were in London. George White came over to me from R. O'C. about the shooting of Wilson. Tobin and Cullen came over afterwards about a rescue . . . There was no discussion about Wilson until three or four months before he was shot. I never heard that Wilson was to have been shot in London in December of 1921.⁵⁸

These two accounts clearly contradict one another. To complicate matters even further, several years later he told Rex Taylor that he believed Dunne acted on his own, and showed Taylor a letter purportedly written by Dunne to prove it.⁵⁹ Kelleher is clearly not a trustworthy witness.

George White, a member of the Dublin Brigade, claimed that he had nothing to do with the shooting but did take part in the abortive rescue plan: 'Kelleher told us all about the Dunne and O'Sullivan business. He said there was an order for Wilson's execution. The London crowd didn't want to do the job; they wanted men from Dublin; but Kelleher himself was very keen.'⁶⁰

White elaborated on this in another statement: 'I believe that Collins' side shot Wilson. I was told that the order to shoot Wilson had been issued twelve months previously. The men who shot him thought that his shooting would clarify the situation which was then confused.'⁶¹

These statements could be interpreted in different ways. In the first it is unclear whether the order referred to was the pre-Treaty one or of more recent origin. In the second, White is again confusing: he points to 'Collins' side', but then seems to support Aherne's belief that the killers acted on their own on the basis of the earlier instruction. It may be that O'Malley's interview notes are to blame for this lack of clarity rather than White himself.

Liam Tobin and Tom Cullen were two of Collins's most valued intelligence men. The only other suggestion of their involvement comes from Tim Pat Coogan in his recent biography of Collins. He reports the deathbed statement (to her son) of Peig ni Braonain, a republican courier in Dublin. A week before Wilson's murder she carried a message to a 'tall

⁵⁸ Denis Kelleher (O'Malley Papers, P17b/107).

⁵⁹ Taylor, *Assassination*, 181–5. See also Denis Kelleher to Rex Taylor, 20 April 1961 (O'Donoghue Papers, MS 31,285), which casts doubt on Taylor's presentation of the letter. Taylor is now deceased and his papers cannot be located, so his copy of this letter cannot be checked (information from Mrs Taylor).

⁶⁰ George White (O'Malley Papers, P17b/105).

⁶¹ 2d. (O'Malley Papers, P17b/99).

man called Tobin' in London. She 'sensed', but was never told, that the message was from Collins, and Coogan concludes that the Tobin mentioned was Liam.⁶² Even if we accept this third-hand evidence and ni Braonain's and Coogan's conclusions as to the identities of the people involved, however, there is no proof that this letter referred to Wilson. Collins, Arthur Griffith, and other Irish leaders were in London at about this time, so the message could have been about almost anything.

Tobin himself spoke to Ernie O'Malley, who wrote down what he said sometime afterwards: 'when Tobin told Mulcahy that our lads had shot Wilson, Mulcahy did not at first believe him, then he said he was going to resign.'⁶³

Here we must tread with care as this is an after-the-fact paraphrase of Tobin's remarks.⁶⁴ The phrase 'our lads' seems to implicate the pro-Treaty side, but it probably only meant that the assassins were members of the I.R.A., contrary to what Mulcahy had believed and said publicly (he knew very little about the I.R.A. in Britain, despite his being Chief of Staff in 1921). Mulcahy may well have threatened to resign because he felt betrayed by being kept in ignorance or because he felt his honour was at stake. It should also be remembered that a deep animosity existed between Tobin and Mulcahy.⁶⁵

Finally, someone signing himself 'One of the 22' (he claimed he was one of twenty-two men assigned to the task of rescuing Dunne and O'Sullivan from prison) wrote in the *Sunday Press* that 'the job was to be done in April, but Wilson was going away on business, and thus was not done until June'.⁶⁶ This provides yet another account of the timing of the supposed plan, though it says nothing of its origin.

Cross Examination

What are we to make of this mass of conflicting and confusing evidence? The first thing to keep in mind is that these events were the subject of

⁶² Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins*, 375–6. ⁶³ Liam Tobin (O'Malley Papers, P17b/94).

⁶⁴ This point is underlined by the fact that this statement is followed by: 'Dunne and O'Sullivan had hoped it would bring about unity between the two sides', which, if Tobin said it, would seem to support the idea that they acted on their own. However, it is probable that these are O'Malley's words, inserted when he recopied his notes.

⁶⁵ See Hopkinson, *Green Against Green*, 62. Mulcahy's discomfort with the subject of the Wilson assassination may be indicated by the fact that his notes and writings, so informative on every other subject, avoid the question altogether.

⁶⁶ *Sunday Press*, 11 Oct. 1953.

rumour and speculation on all sides of Irish politics, and that the debate was politically charged. Michael Collins remained a powerful symbol after his death, the origins of the Civil War were still a bitter source of contention in the 1920s and 1930s, and the main vehicles of the debate, *An Phoblacht*, the *Sunday Press*, and the *Irish Democrat*, were partisan newspapers. Thus, by the 1950s the accounts of those concerned had undoubtedly been influenced by what they read and heard and by their political allegiances. For example, Con Neenan's statement published in 1980 seems to have been prompted by Rex Taylor's book on the assassination.

Another problem evident in the quotations given above is that most accounts are very brief and fragmentary. Not one witness has ever been thoroughly questioned, and no one has supplied a full account. In each case we have to puzzle over what a few words or sentences may mean, so most of our interpretations are clouded by considerable uncertainty.

When was the order given? Joe Dolan says that Collins acted around 8 June. Diarmuid O'Crowley comes very close to this by dating it about 10 June. Frank Martin was approached to help in June and even Frank O'Connor suggests June as the time.⁶⁷ Billie Aherne (according to Ulick O'Connor) remembers Dunne being told by Collins not to carry out the killing in mid-June. At one point Denis Kelleher said that 'discussions' about killing Wilson began in February or March, but not in December. 'One of the 22' places the plan in April, while Pa Murray and one of Con Neenan's statements have it under way in May. Sean McGrath declares that the idea originated in December, and another of Neenan's accounts concurs.

Some of these accounts can be reconciled but others cannot, unless we assume an extraordinarily convoluted series of orders, discussions and false starts. Moreover, if the motive behind the conspiracy was to reunite the I.R.A. or was part of Collins's Northern Ireland strategy, as various writers have suggested, then the question of timing becomes crucial. Neither aim would have been likely to push Collins into such an extreme action in December, February, or March of 1922, since only by May or June did negotiations on these two fronts look hopeless. The conspiracy theories do not start to make political sense until the month before the actual assassination.

Who gave the order and how was it given? McGrath says the I.R.B. in London, with Dunne present, decided to kill Wilson in December. Dolan

⁶⁷ Frank O'Connor, *The Big Fellow* (1965 edn.), 203.

says Collins gave the order to Maguire who passed it on to Dunne. O’Crowley thinks two members of the Provisional Government cabinet (who were also I.R.B. supreme council members) gave the order in London. Martin was told that it came from the anti-Treaty rebels in the Four Courts. Kelleher claims (among other things) that Collins and Rory O’Connor acted together and sent their own men over to help. Frank O’Connor and Billie Aherne believed that Dunne met with Collins in Dublin, although they report different outcomes. To make matters even more complicated, Reggie’s father, Robert Dunne, told the police that Reggie had not been in Dublin since 1921.⁶⁸ Who should we believe?

Beyond the fact that these various statements are riddled with factual errors or inconsistencies on their own, they contradict and discredit one another in nearly every respect. For one of these versions to be accepted as true, almost all the others must be dismissed as false. As a result, although the sheer number of reports seems to indicate some sort of conspiracy, they only support one another if they are used selectively to build a composite—and hence fictional—picture of events. Unfortunately, this is what some writers have done.

One problem with the conspiracy theories is the lack of a ‘smoking gun’, a confession by one of the principals or else some documentary proof connecting Michael Collins with the murder. Joseph Sweeney, a pro-Treaty I.R.A. commander from Donegal, appeared to provide such a link when he reported in the early 1980s that: ‘I met Mick [Collins] on the day that Field-Marshal Wilson was shot in a doorway in London, and I said to him, “Was that an official job?” “Yes”, he said. I never went any further than that with him, but this is a thing that has been in dispute several years. I’ve never said anything about it before, but I think the time has come for not holding out on these things.’⁶⁹ Sweeney had said something before, however. He had told Ernie O’Malley that: ‘I met Collins in Dublin the day after Wilson was shot. “It was two of our men did it” he said. He looked very pleased... “How do we stand about the shooting of Wilson” I asked Collins, and that was his reply.’⁷⁰ He subsequently also confided to Richard Mulcahy (in two separate remarks): ‘Mick also told me later on when I was in Dublin that it was our fellows who shot Sir Henry Wilson’, and ‘He told me it was a couple of our lads

⁶⁸ Statement of Robert Dunne (Lloyd George Papers, F/97/1/30).

⁶⁹ Kenneth Griffith and Timothy O’Grady (eds.), *Curious Journey: An Unfinished History of Ireland’s Unfinished Revolution* (London, 1982), 281.

⁷⁰ Joseph Sweeney (O’Malley Papers, P17b/97).

that did it, that they had had sanction for it. He didn't say from where they had sanction.⁷¹

What *did* Collins say exactly—and when? As it stands, these remembered conversations could support a range of possible interpretations. ‘Our men’, ‘our lads’, and ‘our fellows’ could simply be an admission that, contrary to what Mulcahy had told the press, the men were members of the I.R.A. or I.R.B. ‘An official job’ and a ‘sanction’ could have referred to the earlier plans to kill Wilson in 1921. And, since Sweeney has given us four different versions of this fleeting conversation, perhaps Collins said something else altogether.

Another colleague who spoke to Collins soon after the shooting was Emmet Dalton, a senior officer in the new Irish army. He told Meda Ryan that ‘Collins was angry that the London I.R.A. had taken an irresponsible attitude “at this time”’. Dalton believed Collins had nothing to do with it.⁷² Ernest Blythe, a Provisional Government cabinet minister, echoed this conclusion. He too saw Collins shortly after Wilson's death and thought he was as shocked as anybody (Blythe also felt Collins was hiding something, which he was: the fact that Dunne and O'Sullivan were I.R.A. men).⁷³

One explanation for Collins's apparently contradictory confidences was his habit of telling people what they wanted to hear. Perhaps with the sympathetic Ulsterman, Sweeney, he suggested he had been associated with the shooting, but with Dalton, as with Griffith and Mulcahy, he completely distanced himself. It is with such nudges and winks that he may have convinced a number of people that he had given the order, and perhaps even convinced Dunne that he favoured the killing of Wilson.

Indeed, it may be wrong to frame the question as narrowly as: did Michael Collins order the assassination? In the welter of cliques, rumours, and misinformation which engulfed the Irish republican movement in 1922, there was probably an enormous grey area between ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Collins was faced with a barrage of crises, demands, and decisions and was pulling every available lever to maintain some kind of control. He was simultaneously juggling the I.R.B., the various pro-Treaty factions of the I.R.A., and the new National Army headquartered in Beggar's Bush, not to mention his personal loyalists. He also continued to deal with—and tried

⁷¹ Notes of conversations with Joseph Sweeney, 1962 and 1964 (Mulcahy Papers, P7D/43).

⁷² Ryan, *The Day Michael Collins Was Shot*, 20.

⁷³ Leon O'Broin, *Michael Collins* (Dublin, 1980), 133 and Ryan, *The Day Michael Collins Was Shot*, 18.

to manipulate—elements of the anti-Treaty I.R.A. on issues such as Northern Ireland. It would not be surprising if, amidst all this, Collins or one of his men sent a message or made a remark which Dunne interpreted too literally or over-zealously as giving him the authority to shoot Wilson.

One puzzle still remains. If, rightly or wrongly, Dunne and O'Sullivan did think they were following orders, why did they not say so? The usual I.R.A. procedure in England and Ireland was to declare oneself a soldier of the I.R.A. upon capture, and this the assassins did not do. The *Irish Times* correspondent in London reported that the men called themselves soldiers but refused to give their regiments.⁷⁴ No other newspaper carried this report. Presumably it could be argued that Collins, or whoever gave the order, also told the two men to keep silent no matter what, and then covered it up at their end as well. Would Dunne and O'Sullivan have been willing to go it alone in this fashion? Perhaps, but it does add yet another twist to the story.

A number of red herrings have been dragged across the trail over the years. The first variety are documentary. Rex Taylor makes much of the following entries in Collins's personal diary:

January 26 1922: 'Work for Paddy Dunne.'

February 2 1922: 'Notify Paddy D. Spencer of Cork St., Ross and W. also.'

April 18 1922: 'Mrs. Dunne.'⁷⁵

These have no apparent bearing on the case. As an only child, Reggie Dunne did not have a brother named Patrick. There were many other Dunes active in both the I.R.A. and Sinn Féin to whom Collins's notes could have referred. Several people have also claimed to have seen a written order to kill Wilson signed by Michael Collins. If so it has never been made public, and cannot be considered until it is.⁷⁶

Another oft-evoked 'clue' is the attempt on the part of Collins to rescue or reprieve the killers. However, if this is to be taken as an indication of prior involvement, then it indicts all sections of the I.R.A., as the southern rebels headed by Liam Lynch, the Four Courts faction under Rory O'Connor, and Collins's men were all concerned in the rescue plans. Whether or not he planned the assassination, Collins probably did approve of the act—he was certainly as enraged at events in Belfast as

⁷⁴ *Irish Times*, 23 June 1922. ⁷⁵ Taylor, *Assassination*, 83.

⁷⁶ See e.g. Maguire, *Sunday Tribune*, 27 June 1982. I myself have been told by several people that they have seen such a document, but no one has been able to produce it.

anybody.⁷⁷ Despite his dealings with the British government, he was still a dedicated republican, and Reggie Dunne and Joe O'Sullivan were colleagues whom he felt bound to help. It may be that his activities at this stage served to convince many of those around him of his complicity.

Michael Hopkinson believes that Wilson's assassination was a part of Collins's policy towards Northern Ireland, and that it fits in with Collins's other attempts to attack and weaken the new government there.⁷⁸ While this does provide a plausible context for the murder, it does not explain the earlier plots to kill Wilson in 1921. If the murder was a considered act, why was it not better planned or prepared? Dunne and O'Sullivan had no one to help them, had to find and buy their own guns, and did not even use the morning of 22 June to prepare (O'Sullivan went to work that day as usual, and helped carry out the assassination during his lunch break).⁷⁹

The murder does fit another pattern, however. Political violence in Ireland was driven, not by conspiracies and grand strategies, but by a tit-for-tat logic of reprisal and revenge adhered to by all sides. Early 1922 had seen a proliferation of armed parties accompanied by a loss of central control, both north and south. In this vacuum, local gunmen, whether I.R.A., Special Constabulary, or others, pursued their own little wars. Sectarian violence and revenge killings flourished in the north and spread across the south. Reprisals against unionists became commonplace. It was, in fact, a season of assassinations all across Europe. Just two days after Wilson's death, for example, Walter Rathenau, the German minister for foreign affairs, was shot to death in Berlin. His killers considered him a threat to German nationalism and declared 'We die for our ideals! Others will follow us!'—sentiments which could just as well have been uttered by Wilson's assassins.⁸⁰

Motives

Let us now turn to the one explanation still to be accounted for: that put forward by Reggie Dunne and Joe O'Sullivan themselves. In contrast to his exceedingly quiet home life after he returned from the war, Dunne had proved to be an erratic and very strong-willed commander of the London

⁷⁷ See O'Connor, *The Big Fellow* (1965 edn.), 200–4 and Coogan, *Michael Collins*, 354.

⁷⁸ Hopkinson, *Green Against Green*, 112–14.

⁷⁹ Statements of A. W. Watson and Ernest John Jordan (Lloyd George Papers, F/97/1/30).

⁸⁰ Robert L. G. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism* (New York, 1952), 218–20.

I.R.A. He was jealous of his own authority and reluctant to take advice or orders. After the Truce was declared in July 1921, and without the war to enforce unity, Dunne's relations with his fellow republicans quickly reached a crisis point. He offended and alienated the leaders of the London Cumann na mBan, the women's auxiliary, as well as those of the Irish Self-Determination League, from whom he tried forcibly to extract money and support. These actions and attitudes exasperated Art O'Brien, the leading London republican and a confidant of Michael Collins. O'Brien referred to Dunne as 'a young fellow with such muddled notions', and to the city's I.R.A. unit as a 'farce', a 'fiasco', and a 'Gilbert and Sullivan Opera'.⁸¹ Dunne was also frustrated with his position in the I.R.A. Neither the London organization nor Dunne's rank had ever been officially recognized, a fact which he attributed in part to nationalist snobbery over his English birth.⁸² At the same time, unemployment and inaction were undermining the organization itself, and its members appealed constantly to Dunne for help. He, in turn, looked to Dublin but received no aid.

Then came the Treaty, which divided and weakened the Irish republican community in London. Some I.R.A. men crossed the sea to join the new army, but most simply dropped out of the movement altogether. Dunne's command began to wither away, and he was torn between anti-Treatyites like O'Brien and McGrath, who dominated the London scene, and the pro-Treaty side led by Michael Collins, to whom he felt a strong sense of loyalty.⁸³ The urban guerrillas of the city's I.R.A. tended to be against the Treaty, while many in the I.R.B. were willing to accept Collins's assurances that he was still working towards a republic.

Apparently pulled both ways, Dunne tried to stay neutral, an attitude which did not sit well with hard-line republicans. He (and perhaps O'Sullivan as well) was mocked and challenged by members of Cumann na mBan and his authority was questioned.⁸⁴ All around him his world was falling apart—his only world, as he had dropped out of college, could not find a job, and had no money. Meanwhile he, like most Irish nationalists, was growing more and more outraged by the continuing attacks on

⁸¹ O'Brien to Collins, 10 Feb., 20, 26 July 1921 (O'Brien Papers, MS 8430).

⁸² Dir. of Engineering [Rory O'Connor] to C/S [Richard Mulcahy], 31 Oct. 1921 (Mulcahy Papers, P7/A/27).

⁸³ See Denis Kelleher (O'Malley Papers, P17b/100), Denis Brennan (P17b/107), and Art O'Brien's memoir of the I.R.B. (O'Brien Papers, MS 8427).

⁸⁴ Michael Cremins (O'Malley Papers, P17b/89), Robert Briscoe (P17b/97), and William Aherne (P17b/99).

Catholics in Northern Ireland. Dunne had told his critics that 'I'll show you that we'll do something yet'. It is not difficult to see how he might have sought to resolve his pressures and anxieties in some dramatic and patriotic way. Northern Ireland provided a natural focus—the one issue which united all his former comrades—and Wilson, whose assassination had been planned at least once before, provided an obvious target.

Whatever personal motives may have lain behind the assassination, the political motive was crystal clear. Reggie Dunne described his act as 'ridding the human world of a scourge'. His father, Robert, told the police that 'he [Reggie] has read deeply in the papers about his co-religionists, and the pogroms in Belfast, and I have seen the tears run down his face as he has been reading this. He has very fine feelings.'⁸⁵ Reggie closed his final letter to his mother by saying: 'I was very glad that you heard from the women of Falls Road. That is one of the fruits of my achievement for Ireland.'⁸⁶

What little direct knowledge we have of Dunne's thinking supports this theory.⁸⁷ His letters reveal a Pearse-like martyrological obsession (not unusual in fervent young republicans), replete with references to himself as Christ. He was also a great admirer of Terence MacSwiney, who starved himself to death in the belief that such self-sacrifice would advance the revolution. Dunne clearly saw his actions in these terms. If Reggie Dunne sought to vindicate himself and be a hero, he succeeded. It is striking how many conflicts were put to rest by his action. Art O'Brien and other anti-Treatyites went from criticism to extravagant praise. The Cumann na mBan members who had previously reviled him became instant supporters. I.R.A. men now thought him a hero rather than a failure. He had taken a political stand and he was assured that his parents would be well provided for.

We know almost nothing about O'Sullivan's motives. He was a shy, quiet man and his only surviving letter is largely a collection of political and religious pieties. We do know that O'Sullivan had always been close to Dunne, that he had killed before, and that he was probably the only I.R.A. man in London willing to join with Dunne in an assassination pact. He remains an enigmatic figure, although this does not necessarily mean that there was much more to be revealed.

⁸⁵ Statement of Robert Dunne (Lloyd George Papers, F/97/1/30).

⁸⁶ NLI, MS 2653 contains Dunne's prison letters.

⁸⁷ Several of Dunne and O'Sullivan's comrades also believed they acted on their own for these reasons. See William Aherne (O'Malley Papers, P17b/99) and Mick Cremins (P17b/89).

Was the murder premeditated? At what point the idea occurred to them, or to Dunne, is unknown. They apparently bought their guns only a week before the shooting.⁸⁸ The plan seems to have originated the night before the murder, when O'Sullivan read about Wilson's scheduled appearance at Liverpool Street station the next day.

On 22 June Dunne and O'Sullivan went to the unveiling of the station's war memorial, but it was very crowded. They decided to wait for Wilson outside his home in Eaton Place.⁸⁹ The fact that they carried loaded guns suggests they were out to kill, but they obviously had not devoted any thought or preparation to the plot. O'Sullivan had gone to work that morning and Dunne was carrying incriminating (albeit curiously dated) I.R.A. documents. No escape routes or hiding places had been readied, contrary to their experiences in the 1921 campaign.

According to Denis Kelleher and J. H. MacDonnell, Dunne's and O'Sullivan's lawyer (and a prominent pro-Treaty republican), Dunne confessed that he had not intended to kill Wilson but rather that the shots were fired without prior arrangement, in the heat of the moment.⁹⁰ This may have been so, but it does not accord with the determination with which the attack was pressed home, with the self-assurance displayed by the pair after their capture, or with the principled and coherent justification they offered. In addition, this story conflicts with Dunne's official report of the incident, as quoted at the beginning of this article. Here is yet one more aspect of the case where the evidence points in several directions.

The Verdict

To understand the prevalence of conspiracy theories about Sir Henry Wilson's death, it would be useful to follow the course of this controversy once more. In the aftermath of the killing, the truth about the killers was hidden. Although many people knew about Dunne's and O'Sullivan's personal histories and their close ties with Michael Collins, Rory O'Connor, the I.R.A., and the I.R.B., no one, including the accused men

⁸⁸ See the statement of Ernest Jordan (Lloyd George Papers, F/97/1/30).

⁸⁹ See Dunne's report in the *Sunday Press*, 14 Aug. 1955. He mentions meeting another, unnamed officer the night before. This could have been Dennis Brennan, who says Dunne made no mention of Wilson (O'Malley Papers, P17b/37 and 100), or possibly Sam Maguire. Billie Aherne reports that the latter saw them the night of 21 June but he never knew if they discussed the murder (P17b/99).

⁹⁰ Taylor, *Assassination*, 182-4.

themselves, said anything. Chief of Staff Eoin O'Duffy's denial that they were even I.R.A. members, almost certainly made in good faith, was allowed to stand uncontradicted. However, it is important to remember that any suggestion of a cover-up implicates Rory O'Connor as much as Michael Collins.

Speculation flourished on both sides of the Irish Sea, particularly as the killing did not remain an isolated event. Six days later Provisional Government troops attacked Rory O'Connor's followers in the Four Courts with British guns, and civil war had begun. The assassination had helped trigger the war, and it now became inextricably entangled with its emotional and political legacies. The stage was now set for the first series of 'revelations' about the assassination by anti-Treaty republicans, which might better be described as rumours (with the possible exception of Diarmuid O'Crowley's detailed account). None of these people had any personal involvement in the affair, but they had undoubtedly heard something of Dunne and O'Sullivan's past and their connection with Collins and the hated I.R.B. This organization was widely blamed for the betrayal of the republic, so it was naturally also blamed for Wilson's death.

The second wave of conspiracy theories came with the campaign on the part of Patrick O'Sullivan, Joe's brother, and others to set the record straight. The history of the London I.R.A., the role of Dunne and O'Sullivan in it, and the existence of plans to shoot Wilson in 1921 were all revealed, but absolutely no proof was offered that Collins or any other Irish leader was involved in the 1922 murder.

The subsequent confusion, accusations, and misinterpretations flowed from two basic errors, which became entrenched in the debate at this time:

First, there *was* a cover-up of sorts—but of Dunne's and O'Sullivan's active membership in the I.R.A. and involvement in earlier assassination plots, not of a conspiracy to kill Wilson in 1922. Moreover, it was a passive rather than an active cover-up (no doubt at least partly the result of the distraction and deaths caused by the Civil War), which involved people on all sides of Irish politics.

Second, there *was* a plot to murder Wilson—but in 1921, not 1922, and Rory O'Connor and others were almost certainly just as involved in its planning as Michael Collins.

There is no solid evidence to support a conspiracy theory linking Michael Collins or anyone else to the murder. In the absence of such

evidence, we must accept the assertions of the murderers that they acted alone, in the (grossly mistaken) belief that Wilson was responsible for Catholic deaths in Belfast. My own hypothesis as to Dunne's and O'Sullivan's motives cannot be definitely proven, but it fits not only with what we know of them and the London I.R.A. and I.R.B., but also with the general anarchy and proliferation of revenge killings in Ireland at the time.

Although this chapter has probed the supposed riddles of plots and secret societies, the reality was, ultimately, not very 'mysterious'. For two young Irish idealists to take matters into their own hands and shoot a hated foe was not a particularly unusual political act in the summer of 1922.